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ABSTRACT

The intersection of the ethnographer's method of participant observation and the historian's central concern with chronology provides a potentially useful approach for construction of a historical ethnography of childhood through oral history. The first stage of ethnographic activity, fieldwork centered in participant observation, is not unlike the process which occurs each time the oral historian knocks on the door of a potential interviewee. The face-to-face encounter inevitably combines participation with observation, and subjectivity with objectivity. The subjective-objective dialectic inherent in both ethnography and oral history makes the second phase of research, the representation of texts obtained in the field, a matter of critical importance. This second stage embodies particular complexities, for each participant observer takes from the field not only data, but also a sense of responsibility as to its best representation, or textualization. The oral historian, however, must also engage in an ongoing dialectic between past and present. Once recollections are interpreted as to what they have to tell about the present, attention must be given to interpretation of the past, as far as possible in its own terms. At this point, insights derived from the concept of participant observation must be broadened if the historical ethnography of childhood is to be constructed. (RH)

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# CONSTRUCTING THE HISTORICAL ETHNOGRAPHY OF CHILDHOOD THROUGH ORAL HISTORY

A working paper presented to the American Educational Research Association, 27 March 1989

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Sources for constructing the history of childhood are limited and, to an extent, biased. Records documenting treatment accorded children survive in forms ranging from statutes and legislation to the archives of organizations concerned with child welfare. Information on activities for children exists in the records of schools, churches, and voluntary associations. Such sources, however, treat children primarily as objects being acted upon by others, and it is in attempting to get beyond this perspective that difficulties become particularly evident: descriptions of childhood written contemporaneously, that is, in childhood, are both comparatively rare and misleading in that certain subgroups in the society have been much more disposed to undertake such activity.[2]

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[1] I am grateful to the Strategic Grants Division of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council for its financial assistance to the Canadian Childhood History Project under whose auspices this working paper was conceived.

[2] For example, despite a very intensive search the English historian of childhood Linda A. Pollock discovered just 48 published and unpublished British and American diaries written or begun in childhood, that is through age 15, between the years 1500 and 1900. Of the 31 which were British, 19 were written by females, as were 13 of the 17 American diaries, 8 of them by female Puritans. Nineteen of the 31 British authors belonged to the upper or upper-middle class, all but 3 of the remainder to the middle class. Virtually all the American diaries were upper-middle or middle class in origin. See her *Forgotten Children: Parent-child Relations from 1500 to 1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 272-88.



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Historians of childhood, particularly those concerned with the experience of childhood, have therefore turned to memory. Until recently the focus was on memory in written forms, such as memoirs and autobiographies, but increasingly, as technology has made the necessary equipment more accessible, it has also encompassed its oral variant. Unlike traditional historical research, limited to materials which happen to exist, oral history makes it possible actually to bring data into being. As put by the Norwegian social historian Edvard Bull, who has examined child labour using interviews, "we . . . are no longer necessarily captives of the pre-existing sources."[3] In the words of the leading British oral historian Paul Thompson, we can open up what have been "effectively secret areas" of the past. "The history of childhood as a whole becomes practicable for the first time."[4]

Growing interest in oral history over the past two decades has generated a large number of scholarly and popular studies as well as considerable debate over the methodology's strengths and limitations.[5] The utility of oral history as acceptable

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Letters written in childhood also demonstrate a tendency to want to please the recipient or possibly an intermediary, as with letters written within a school environment. In my own research on the history of private boys' boarding schools in British Columbia, I was given access to three sets of letters written home but in each case cautioned by their author against taking them "too seriously," since they were routinely read and censored by the headmaster before being dispatched home. Thus, while possession also of the oral information made these particular letters a useful source on acceptable attitudes, the letters taken on their own, as on discovery in an archive, could be interpreted in misleading fashion. See my *Growing Up British in British Columbia: Boys in Private School* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1984), 82-83 and *passim* for use of this correspondence.

3 Edvard Bull, "Industrial Boy Labour in Norway," in *Our Common History: The Transformation of Europe*, ed. Paul Thompson with Natasha Burchardt (London: Pluto Press, 1982), 223.

4 Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 7. This work, first published in 1978, remains to be mind by far the best introduction to both the substance and techniques of oral history.

5 The technique, whose growth was facilitated by new, more accessible recording technology, developed differently in the United States, dominated by an establishment or even elitist orientation, than in Canada, Britain and continental Europe, where the focus has been more on creating the "people's history." The different emphases are most clearly visible in the respective publications: see Oral History Association [US], *Newsletter* (1967- ), *Oral History Review* [US] (1973- ), *Oral History: the Journal of the Oral History Society* [Britain] (1973- ), and Canadian

scholarly research has, however, been primarily examined as applicable to aspects of adulthood.[6] Indeed, publications centred on childhood have been slim compared with total output.[7] Part of the reason may be that the experience of childhood is in contrast to that of adulthood not only considered difficult to retrieve but also difficult to interpret. Our own memories tell us that recollections will be sketchy and selective and therefore, it might be argued, of little utility.

Those of us who specialize in the history of childhood thereby acquire a special responsibility to search out inovative and imaginative research techniques opening up new windows to the past. My particular experience with oral history over the past decade has turned my attention to ethnography with its guiding metaphor of

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Oral History Association, *Journal* (1975/76- ). The foundation in 1980 of the *International Journal of Oral History* with an advisory board consisting of leading oral historians from across the world represented a conscious attempt by American practitioners to move beyond national parochialism.

6 For an historiographical overview, see Thompson, *Voice*, 72-100.

7 See, for example, Bull, "Industrial Boy Labour"; Thea Vigne Thompson, *Edwardian Childhoods* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), and her earlier "A Lost World of Childhood," *New Society* 5 October 1972, 20-23; Jeremy Seabrook, *Working-Class Childhood* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1982); Valerie Quinney, "Childhood in a Southern Mill Village," *International Journal of Oral History* 3 (1982), 167-92; and Robert Westall, ed., *Children of the Blitz: Memories of Wartime Childhood* (New York: Viking, 1985). On the strengths and weaknesses of these various studies, see Jean Barman, "Accounting for Class and Gender in Retrieving the History of Canadian Childhood," Canadian History of Education Association, *Bulletin* 5, 2 (1988), 1-27.

In Canada, the Canadian Childhood History Project has focussed to a considerable extent on oral history as a methodology. Relevant publications to date include the article cited just above; Neil Sutherland: "'Listening to the Winds of Childhood': The Role of Memory in the History of Childhood," Canadian History of Education Association, *Bulletin* 5, 1 (1988), 1-29; Sutherland, "'Everyone seemed happy in those days': the Culture of Childhood in Vancouver Between the 1920s and the 1960s," *History of Education Review* 15 (1986), 37-51; Sutherland, "The Triumph of 'Formalism': Elementary Schooling in Vancouver from the 1920s to the 1960s," *BC Studies*, nos. 69-70 (Spring/Summer 1986), 175-210, also published as *Vancouver Past: Essays in Social History*, ed. R.A.J. McDonald and Jean Barman (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1986); and Barman, "Separate and Unequal: Indian and White Girls at All Hallows School, 1884-1920," 110-31 in *Indian Education in Canada*, ed. Jean Barman, Yvonne Hébert and Don McCaskill, vol. 1: *The Legacy* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1986). Also see Barman, *Growing Up British*.

participant observation.[8] Yet on its own ethnography is almost always, as a committed practitioner recently acknowledged to me, "flat" in that it "looks at a cross-section, but not how it got there, what came before."[9] I have as a consequence chosen to define what I want to propose here as a possible approach to constructing the history of childhood through oral history as "historical ethnography."[10] So doing incorporates the concept of chronology, central to the historian.[11]

While focussing here on oral history as a technique, I am not suggesting that other sources for the history of childhood be ignored when they become available. Historians emphasize the need to corroborate all evidence, oral or otherwise, just as

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[8] The discipline of ethnography, once reserved for a select few who had undergone some specific rite of passage, has seen over the last decade what the ethnographer John Van Maanen characterizes as the "enthusiastic embrace of fieldwork by the hoi poloi outside the temples of ethnography," particularly what he terms "adjectival ethnography" such as educational ethnography perceived as particularly useful to get "inside" schools and, thus indirectly, also children (*Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988], 23-24 and 30-31). Of the introductions which exist to educational ethnography, two of the most useful are Peter Woods, *Inside Schools: Ethnography in Educational Research* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), and Judith Preissle Goetz and Margaret Diane LeCompte, *Ethnography and Qualitative Design in Educational Research* (Orlando: Academic Press, 1984).

[9] Comment made by Cecilia Reynolds of Brock University at biennial meeting of Canadian History of Education Association, University of Western Ontario, October 1988.

[10] This suggested term must be differentiated from "ethnohistory" with its emphasis on understanding the perspective of the indigenous peoples on whom ethnographers' attention traditionally focussed. As Bernard S. Cohn points out in "Anthropology and History in the 1980s" (*Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 12, 2 [1981], 227-52), the discipline's self-evaluation emerging out of decolonization was in good part responsible for the rise of ethnohistory. For a useful introduction, see Bruce G. Trigger, "Ethnohistory: Problems and Prospects," *Ethnohistory* 29 (1982), 1-19.

[11] This is not to suggest that other historians have not looked to ethnography for insights. A special issue of the *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* in 1981 (vol. 12, no. 2), was devoted to the utility of links between anthropology and history. Particularly valuable is Natalie Z. Davis, "The Possibilities of the Past," 267-75. The historical relationship between history and ethnography is examined in François Furet, *In the Workshop of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 68-74, where the argument is made that "both disciplines were the instruments for describing the human universe; but history drew up an inventory of time, and ethnology an inventory of space" (68).

ethnographers do the necessity for "triangulation."[12] Likewise, by restricting myself here -- due to constraints of time and space -- to one principal contribution from each of the disciplines of ethnography and history to the making of historical ethnography, I am not discounting other points of intersection between the two disciplines.

Ethnography's methodological mainstay of participant observation resonates for the oral historian. The ethnographer John Van Maanen defines his discipline as "the peculiar practice of representing the social reality of others through the analysis of one's own experience in the world of these others."[13] There are then two distinct stages which comprise ethnography, the first the actual "experience in the world of . . . others" and, secondly, its representation, most often in written form. By examining each of these stages, we become aware of the full extent to which the metaphor of participant observation applies also to the history of childhood.

For ethnographers each stage presumes an inherent dialectic between participation and observation, between the subjective and the objective. As put by the ethnographer James Clifford, a "delicate balance of subjectivity and objectivity" lies at the heart of the discipline.[14] While scholars more generally, even in the "pure" sciences, have increasingly realized that "objectivity" as once understood is never

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12 Harry F. Wolcott emphasizes the necessity for triangulation, "obtaining information in many ways rather than relying solely on one." See his "Ethnographic Research in Education," in *Complementary Methods For Research in Education*, ed. Richard M. Jaeger (Washington: American Educational Research Association, 1988), 192. As well as printed sources of various kinds, ethnographers use standardized tests, questionnaires and interviews, both of the life-history variety and in the form of discussions with "informants."

13 Van Maanen, *Tales of the Field*, ix. Of the numerous introductions to ethnography, I have found particularly useful H. Russell Bernard, *Research Methods in Cultural Anthropology* (Newbury Park: Sage, 1988); Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson, *Ethnography: Principles in Practice* (London: Tavistock, 1983); R.F. Ellen, *Ethnographic Research: A Guide to General Conduct* (London: Academic Press, 1984); and Oswald Werner and G. Mark Schoepfle, *Systematic Fieldwork*, 2 vols. (Newbury Park: Sage, 1987).

14 James Clifford, "Introduction: Partial Truths," in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 13.

achievable,[15] ethnographers have, perhaps as a consequence of their primary research methodology of participant observation, been particularly reflective on the

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15 Among revisionist works emanating from the sciences are Karin D. Knorr-Cetina, *The Manufacture of Knowledge: An Essay on the Constructivist and Contextual Nature of Knowledge* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1981); Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar, *Laboratory Life: The Social Construction of Scientific Facts* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1979); and Michael Lynch, *Art and Artifact in Laboratory Science: A Study of the Shopwork and Shoptalk in a Research Library* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985).

Some historians have also become critical of the primacy once accorded "truth" and "objectivity" in the supposed pursuit of "historical accuracy." Not only has the search for "grand theory" been largely called off, but the promise once held out by tying together social science and history, in part through quantifying the past, has been recognized as largley unfulfilled. Hayden White has, for example, for a decade and more compared the process of imposing order on historical data to the writing of fiction. See his *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1973), and *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1978), esp. 121-30.

Despite critiques voiced of White (as in Michael Stanford, *The Nature of Historical Knowledge* [London: Basil Blackwell, 1986], esp. 131-37), overflow sessions greet such topics as semiotics and literary theory at recent meetings of the American Historical Association. Also indicative of changing attitudes is the lead forum on history and film in the discipline's premier journal, the *American Historical Review* 93, 5 (December 1988), 1172-1227. In it, Robert Rosenstone concludes, "History does not exist until it is created. And we create it in terms of our underlying values. Our kind of rigorous, 'scientific' history is in fact a product of history, our special history that includes a particular relation to the written word, a rationalized economy, notions of individual rights, and the nation-state. Many cultures have done quite well without this kind of history, which is only to say that there are -- as we all know but rarely acknowledge -- many ways to represent and relate to the past." See his "History in Images," 1184-85. The view is clearly still not generally held, however, as indicated by the responses to Rosenstone in the same issue and by such even more conservative perspectives as Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The New History and the Old* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987).

implications.[16] As Clifford observes, "ethnographic truths are . . . inherently partial -- committed and incomplete."[17]

The first stage for the ethnographer -- fieldwork centred in participant observation -- is not unlike the process which occurs each time the oral historian,

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[16] Indeed, the subjectivity-objectivity tension seems to have become so central to ethnography as to spawn what appears to the outsider to be a potentially major division within the disicpline as to future directions. While my reading of the literature remains selective, I infer significant differences between those who want to build on the reality of subjectivity and those who are attempting to impose more rigourous, "scientific" research techniques in order to ward off the danger of subjectivity. The debate underlies Van Maanen, *Tales of the Field*, and is summarized in Patricia A. Adler and Peter Adler, "The Past and Future of Ethnography," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 16, no. 1 (1987), 4-24, esp. 11-13. In the same issue Robert M. Emerson points up the potential conflicts between the two revisist directions. See "Four Ways to Improve Fieldwork," 76-77.

Some of the concern clearly originates in the historical link between most ethnographic work and colonization. Western colonizers assumed their superiority and "objectivity" in relationship to the indigenous peoples most often studied by early ethnographers. The larger process of decolonization revealed not only the power inequalities inherent in the relationship but the significant degree to which what had been perceived as absolute truths contained an important subjective component. See especially Cohn, "Anthropology": his "History and Anthropology: The State of Play," *Comparative Study of Society and History* 22 (1980), 198-224; and Van Maanen, 93.

The two directions being urged on ethnographers are evident in much of the recent methodological literature. The "scientific" approach with its emphasis on coding and categorizing, seemingly almost as an end in itself and at the expense of context, underlies, for instance, Michael H. Agar's guide in the Sage Research Methods Series, *Speaking of Ethnography* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1986), as well as his earlier *The Professional Stranger: An Informal Introduction to Ethnography* (New York: Academic Press, 1980). At its extreme the approach perceives ethnographers as interchangable within a research setting so long as designated procedures are followed. The utility of "ethnoscience," as it is sometimes termed, for oral history is limited.

A well-known example of the move toward greater subjectivity, more particularly, toward literary consciousness, are the essays in Clifford and Marcus, *Writing Culture*. In the case of some of the contributions, delight in jargon makes for difficult reading and limited potential for oral historians. In the view of Van Maanen, such scholars seem "determined to write themselves out of existence." "Such abstruse jargon repels the uninitiated, and a circle closes in on itself" (28).

The field may well become redefined by such "deconstruction workers" (a term used by Van Maanen, 5) in one direction or the other, but this is to my mind a concern for its theorists and practioners, not for outsiders like myself concerned with the discipline's basic characteristics. In sum, I agree fully with Natalie Zemon Davis' observation that "we must read ethnographic material with enough care to understand the argument and the evidence for it. But need we import all the special reservations anthropologists have about each others' work?" (Davis, "Possibilities," 273)

[17] Clifford, "Introduction," 7. Van Maanen in *Tales of the Field*, 34, makes virtually an identical point in his statement that "truth as judged by some external, invariant standard is untenable when applied to ethnography (i.e., all truths are partial and contestable)." Clifford includes the analogy of the Cree hunter asked to describe his way of life in a James Bay lands case who, when administered the oath hesitated. "'I'm not sure I can tell the truth. . . . I can only tell what I know'" (8).

with tape recorder in hand, knocks on the door of a potential interviewee.[18] The oral historian must, for a time at least, participate "subjectively" in the world that lies behind the door. However much he/she is "objectively" prepared according to the canons of historical research, the resulting experience inevitably combines participation with observation, subjectivity with objectivity. This is precisely because both ethnographers and oral historians concern themselves with, to requote from Van Maanen's definition, "worlds of others" whose "social reality" is at least in part created by the researcher. The focus of the ethnographer is most often termed a "culture," defined as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society."[19] The elements comprising a "culture" have become increasingly viewed as "texts," and it is from these "texts" as they become visible to the participant observer that culture is inferred. What is particular critical to the ethnographer is the realization that "texts (on behaviour, belief, ritual, etc.) taken from the field must first be constructed, since they do not come prepackaged."[20]

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[18] It is important to keep in mind that ethnographers also utitilize interviews in a variety of forms ranging from ongoing informal conversations with "informants" to very extensive life-course interviews. Limitations of space unfortunately preclude comparison with their use in oral history. Useful sources from the ethnographic literature include Bernard, *Research Methods*, 203-40; Werner and Schoepfle, *Systematic Fieldwork*, vol. 1, 289-343; Sue Jones, "Depth Interviewing," 45-70 in *Applied Qualitative Research*, ed. Robert Walker (Aldershot, England: Gower Publishing Co., 1985); and Lawrence C. Watson and Maria-Barbara Watson-Franke, *Interpreting Life Histories: An Anthropological Inquiry* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1985).

[19] "E.B. Tyler's famous definition of culture," as quoted in Talal Asad, "The Concept of Cultural Translation in British Social Anthropology," in *Writing Culture*, 141. A similer definition refers to "the ideas, rules, practices, codes and recipe knowledge that is called 'culture.'" J. Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), quoted in Peter K. Manning, "The Ethnographic Conceit," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 16, 1 (1987), 61. Manning is particularly concerned to link ethnography with semiotics, which he sees as providing "a set of assumptions and concepts that permit the useful systematic analysis of symbolic relations" (61).

[20] Van Maanen, *Tales of the Field*, 76.

The oral historian's "world of others" may or may not be most suitably also defined as a "culture." Nonetheless, that world is similarly inferred through "texts," which in this case emerge through the interview process. As in ethnography, texts do not come prepackaged since, as Thompson has put it, "recalling is an active process."[21] A relationship must first be established between interviewer and interviewee.[22] Then, as two American oral historians discovered, "no matter how controlled the schedule of questions, the information is produced in a dialogue between individuals, each with a social position and identity, engaging in a conversation that exists at a necessary remove, in time or social space, from the experience being discussed." As they emphasize, this is "a fundamentally different relationship than usually exists between historians and the mute and frozen documents of the past."[23] One consequence has been considerable debate over whether the interviewer should be an "insider" or an "outsider."[24] An argument has even been made for adopting what is essentially an ethnographic approach:

> In order to be able to perceive the subjective meanings an actor gives to his or her own, or his or her partner's action, the research must abandon the perspective of an outsider, detached observer and

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21 Thompson, *Voice*, 114. See also Alessandro Portelli, "The Peculiarities of Oral History," *History Workshop* 12 (1981), 101.

22 This concern was already evident in Ronald Grele's *Envelopes of Sound*, published in 1975 (Chicago: Precedent Publishing); see 2-3, 81-84 and 136-37. Also see Grele, "A Surmisable Variety: Interdisciplinary and Oral Testimony," *American Quarterly* 27 (1975), 275-95.

23 Michael Frisch and Dorothy L. Watts, "Oral History and the Presentation of Class Consciousness: The *New York Times* versus the Buffalo Unemployed," *International Journal of Oral History* 1 (1980), 90.

24 Many positions comprise this discussion, including advocacy of "a series of interviews which allow for the uncovering of different layers of memory" and use of two interviewers, "one an insider and the other an outsider." See Thompson and Burchardt, "Introduction," 16; Orvar Lofgren, "The Swedish Family: a Study of Privatisation and Social Change since 1880," in Thompson with Burchardt, *Our Common History*, 234; and Elmer Luchterhand, "Knowing and Not Knowing: Involvement in Nazi Genocide," in Thompson with Burchardt, *Our Common History*, 259-60.

> adopt the perspective of the actor, in order to be open to the actor's own, rather than the researcher's preconceived categories.[25]

The dialectic between subjectivity and objectivity common to ethnography and oral history is, as this statement acknowledges, strongly affected by the assumptions and preconceptions of the researcher. The ethnographer meticulously observes, recording all that is observed, yet throughout the process constant choices are inevitable. "The specific traditions and disciplines" from which a study begins in effect "determine what a fieldworker will find interesting and hence see, hear, and eventually write."[26] A good example of a longstanding gap in observation, and one acknowledged by both Clifford and Van Maanen, is women's experience. Until very recently the male world was equated with the human world. Even female ethnographers tended to observe principally what men were doing, from which "culture" was then inferred.[27] The results of participant observation "are always experientially contingent and highly variable by setting and by person."[28]

The same situation exists for the oral historian, as indeed it does for all historians. The eminent historian E.H. Carr has made the point in his much quoted comparison of historical facts to fish:

> The facts are really not at all like fish on the fishmonger's slab. They are like fish swimming about in a vast and sometimes inaccessible ocean; and what the historian catches will depend

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25 Katherin Jensen, "Oral Histories of Rural Western American Women: Can They Contribute to Quantitative Studies?" *International Journal of Oral History* 5 (1984), 162. The relationship between ethnography and oral history was recognized in a special issue of *Oral History Review* (15 [1987]) entitled "Fieldwork in Oral History."

26 Van Maanen, *Tales of the Field*, 5.

27 Clifford, "Introduction," 18, and Van Maanen, *Tales of the Field*, 37, fn. 4.

28 Van Maanen, *Tales of the Field*, 4.

> partly on chance, but mainly on what part of the ocean he chooses to fish in and what tackle he chooses to use -- these two factors being, of course, determined by the kind of fish he wants to catch. By and large, the historian will get the kind of fish he wants.[29]

The consequence has been that, not only the history of women but that of many groups traditionally considered less significant in the course of events, such as children, were long ignored or minimized in the dominant scholarship. If part of the reason lay in a paucity of sources, itself the consequence of past judgments as to the kind of records perceived as important to create and maintain, it must also be attributed to ongoing decisions by historians as to the kinds of research best undertaken. Women were long just as invisible to historians as to ethnographers. While the advent of oral history has made it possible to compensate for the lack of one-way sources on groups such as women and children, it does not of itself necessarily alter historians' subjectivities and, even when it does, their replacement are inevitably other subjectivities. We must perforce make judgment calls as to what is and what is not significant, whether we be ethnographers in the field taking notes of what is observed, oral historians following up on replies in an interview, or scholars of any discipline deciding which one-way sources to have photocopied from an archive.

While such decisions are inevitably influenced by our individual and group perceptions of relative significance, they also derive out of the scholarly tradition from which we conduct research. A consequence of ethnographers' reliance on participant observation is a concern to avoid "too much theoretical specification prior to beginning fieldwork . . . in part because it increases the likelihood of ignoring or misinterpreting the meanings that events have to members of the setting studied."[30]

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29 E.H. Carr, *What is History?* (New York: Random House, 1967), 26.

30 Emerson, "Four Ways," 75.

To the extent that hypotheses emerge, they are grounded in meticulous and extensive participant observation.[31]

The reverse has been true for some oral historians, particularly those committed to the canons of traditional history with its reliance on one-way sources. Historians most often begin with a hypothesis, a preliminary statement embodying preconceived notions of what will emerge out the research.[32] The necessity for the oral historian to participate in the creation of sources thereupon becomes viewed as a weakness to be offset or overcome rather than a strength to be built upon. The threat posted by subjectivity must be, so far as possible, eliminated. Special efforts are made to ensure random or other sampling of potential interviewees.[33] Information is then

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[31] For some ethnographers fieldwork must, for its findings to be acceptable, involve months and years of participant-observation. Increasingly, however, the practical contingencies of everyday life have mitigated against the heroic exploits of the discipline's pioneers, and variations on the theme have become common practice, if not necessarily generally acceptable. This point is made in Van Maanen, *Tales of the Field*, 9-10, fn. 2, and 53; and in Adler and Adler, "Past and Future," 17-19, which notes that, following research for a doctoral dissertation, "only a handful of ethnographers have been able to make the leap to a second, and even third, depth study of a social world" (18). In the same issue, John Lofland acknowledges that the "enthusiasm for ethnography or fieldwork that was contagiously postive" in the 1960s and early 1970s has subsequently waned. See "Reflections on a Thrice-Named Journal," 31. Cohn makes a similar point in "History and Anthropology," 206-07.

Emerson in "Four Ways" observes that "we preach 'immersion' and 'intimate familiarity,' yet all too often engage in a sort of quick in-and-out practice that not only contradicts the underlying rationale for ethnography but also is probably better done by explicity quantitative means." He points to the practical limitations exerted by academic careers, but concludes that, "with few exceptions, fieldwork studies require intense involvement over substantially longer periods of time than mark current practice" (72). One practical consequence is that, in the literature, most ethnographers, even when supposedly discussing larger theoretical, possibly revisionist issues, cannot resist linking them to the fieldwork they once undertook.

To discuss, as this paper does, the utility of ethnographic methdology in another context is to assume the poesibility of variation and adaptation.

[32] One recent guide to historical method defines a hypothesis as, at the minimum, "a provisional explanation" based on the secondary literature. He adds that "a hypothesis is not just a preliminary assessment of a particular historical conjuncture in its own terms; it usually reflects certain assumptions about the nature of society and of the historical process as a whole; in other words, historical hypotheses amount to an applicaiton of *theory* [italics in original]." John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of Modern History* (London: Logman, 1984), 128.

[33] Thompson, *Voice*, 125-28, discusses strategies for so doing.

sought from these individuals primarily in order to demonstrate, explicate or refute hypotheses formulated well in advance, usually out of a combination of theory and research in one-way sources.[34] Questions are carefully constructed based on the written sources and responses just as carefully recorded, if not on tape than with meticulous notes.[35] All too often the voice which ends up being transcribed is only that of the historian carefully adding one more brick to a pre-existing edifice, not surprisingly so, given that a prime goal has been so far as possible to counter the threat imposed by oral history's "two-wayness" rather than, as is the case with ethnography, building upon the inevitability of subjectivity.

The concept of participant observation puts the emphasis, as indeed it should be in attempting to retrieve the experience of childhood, on what actually was or is . . . perceived to have been rather than on what is desired by us as the detached scholar. We must listen and listen carefully to what is being said, being particularly sensitive to the intertwining of subjectivity and objectivity. While we necessarily must have some conception of what we are about, why we are undertaking a particular research enterprise, it is equally important to guard against prejudging or predetermining what will emerge. Whether our preconceptions be based on some larger theoretical formulation or simply on our own experience, we should not be so presumptious as to conclude in advance how an interviewee's childhood occurred or, more accurately, is perceived in retrospect to have occurred. Thus, rather than a list of questions

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[34] Thus arises the attitude of scholarly superiority toward such "popular" oral historians as, in the case of Canada, Barry Broadfoot who simply present in printed form a series of interviews on a particular general topic, such as the depression or prairie settlement.

[35] The limitations of assuming the correctness of written sources is emphasized in Luisa Passarini, "Italian Working Class Culture Between the Wars: Consensus to Fascism and Work Ideology," *International Journal of Oral History* 1 (1980), 4-8; and her "Working Ideology and Working Class Attitudes to Fascism" in Thompson with Burchardt, *Our Common History*, 54-55 and 59-61. Also see Bull, "Industrial Boy Labour," 224; Trevor Lummis, "Structure and Validity in Oral Evidence," *International Journal of Oral History* 2 (1981), 111, and Barbara Allen, "Re-creating the Past: The Narrator's Perspective in Oral History," *Oral History Review* 12, 1 (1984), 1-12.

carefully prepared in advance, to be asked one after the other, it becomes preferable to arrive with a check list of topics to be covered by the time the interview is complete. Sensitivity to the particular circumstances will then determine whether that actual interview be conducted as questions and answers or in free flowing format.

As the case of women again usefully demonstrates, we can learn far more when we, so far as possible, let the texts speak for themself. Several researchers have observed that men and women perceive their experiences differently, be it in childhood or adulthood.[36] While collecting life histories of migrants to Paris, the French oral historian Isabelle Bertaux-Wiame became aware of "two contrasting images." The men she interviewed "consider the life they have lived as *their own*," "as a series of self-conscious acts, a rational pursuit of well-defined goals." "They present themselves as the subjects of their own lives--as the actors." In sharp contrast, female interviewees focussed not on "self-conscious acts," but rather on "their *relationship* to such or such a person." Bertaux-Wiame noted how "men will use the 'I' much more often than women." When women did use the "I," "it is the 'I' in relation to another person." "And very often, women preferred to use 'we' or 'one' (*on* in French), thus denoting the particular relationship which underlay this part of their life."[37]

Conversely, a male scholar focussing on the experience of childhood among the British working class discovered that "women tend to speak with greater readiness than

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36 For detail on this point, see Barman, "Accounting."

37 Italics in original. Isabelle Bertaux-Wiame, "The Life History Approach to the Study of Internal Migration: how Women and Men Came to Paris Between the Wars," in Thompson with Burchardt, *Our Common History*, 189-93. For similar reports see the "International Conference on Oral History and Women's History, Columbia University, 18-20 November 1983," in *Oral History* 12,1 (1984), 8-12; Sara Diamond, "Women in the B.C. Labour Movement," Canadian Oral History Association, *Journal* 6 (1983), 10; Kathryn Anderson *et al*, "Beginning Where We Are: Feminist Methodology in Oral History," *Oral History Review* 15 (1987), 125, 126 and 118; and Kathryn Anderson, "Washington Women's Heritage Project," Canadian Oral History Association, *Journal* 6 (1983), 12. In her very first interview, Anderson discovered that out of three and a half hours of conversation, her respondant spent just seven minutes talking directly about herself not in relation to someone else.

men." He considered it "no doubt a result of society's belief that being in touch with feelings is a more fitting activity for women," but it may also have resulted from women's greater level of comfort in discussing childhood experiences which for the most part tend to occur within a larger set of relationships, familial and institutional.[38] In a study analyzing female performance in elementary school, another English historian observed that

> Primary classrooms ask from children attention, the capacity to listen, a large degree of patience, and a sensitivity to human needs. Girls between four and eleven have usually had these virtues inculcated with a greater degree of firmness than have little boys and their experience is superficially confirmed in the classroom in a way denied their brothers.[39]

It is only by becoming a participant observer that such insights emerge.

Much more so than in North America, European oral historians have become sensitive to the multiple layers of subjectivity inherent in the interview process. As the leading Italian practitioner Louisa Passarini discovered when interviewing working-class Italians concerning their experience of Fascism during the interwar years, questions deriving from facts found in one-way sources often proved irrelevant. Her "oral sources refuse[d] to answer certain kinds of questions," were "reticent or enigmatic," responding with "silences and jokes." "Answers may be 'inconsistent' in the sense that they show discrepancies with the accepted picture of main historical events and processes." Passarini soon learned to rephrase her questions, originally inferred from analysis of written sources about Fascism rather than the actual

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38 Seabrook, *Working-Class Childhood*.

39 Carolyn Steedman, *The Tidy House: Little Girls Writing* (London: Virago, 1983), 3-4.

experience of Fascism as described by her interviewees.[40] Similarly, while examining Norwegian child labour, Bull soon discovered that the official records from which he had begun "were entirely wrong."[41] In other words, conceptions of childhood at a certain time and place based on written sources may simply not conform to the reality of childhood as it was actually experienced. Why this should have been the case then becomes especially important to determine.

Conversely, we must abandon, to quote Passarini, "the naive assumption that it [oral history] describes the past as it really was."[42] At the most basic level, however much statistical maneuvering be engaged in, retrospective representativeness of interviewees will never be achieved.[43] Mortality, locatibility and accessibility all help determine who we choose to interview. Here again the insights of ethnographers are useful, suggesting that rather than lamenting the lack of a "representative" sample, we build on the strengths deriving from participant observation with its possibility for interacting with interviewees.[44] The particular project will determine the strategy, possibly searching out individuals proximate to particular events under

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40 Passarini, "Italian Working Class Culture," 54-55 and 59-61.

41 Bull, "Industrial Boy Labour," 224.

42 Report on Fourth International Oral History Conference held September 1982 in "News from Abroad," *Oral History* 11, 1 (1983), 19.

43 This concept is advocated by Thompson in *Voice*, 125-28. The leading American oral historian Ronald Grele (*Envelopes of Sound*, 131) has disagreed with Thompson's notion of "retrospective representativeness," terming it "a false issue": "interviewees are selected, not because they represent some abstract statistical norm, but because they typify historical processes." The French practitioners, Daniel Bertaux and Isabelle Bertaux-Wiame, discovered when conducting their interviews, which were not statistically based, "a process of saturation" where "every new life story was confirming what the preceding ones had shown." Bertaux-Wiame, "Life Stories in the Bakers' Trade," in *Biography and Society: The Life History Approach in the Social Sciences*, ed. Daniel Bertaux (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1981), 187. Also see Jensen, "Oral Histories," 160.

44 This does not mean that ethnographers discount the importance of representativeness so far as it is important within the context of particular research and is achievable. For a useful general discussion, see Bernard, *Research Methods*, 11-109.

investigation as in Thea Vigne Thompson's *Edwardian Childhoods* possibly building on a chain of acquaintances to determine a collective perspective as in Neil Sutherland's work, possibly selecting similar numbers of individuals representing each of several variables under investigation as I have done in my earlier work and will pursue in forthcoming research analyzing intergenerational continuity in a company town.[45]

Most importantly, oral history will never "describe the past as it really was" because memory, which lies at the heart of what the enterprise is all about, is selective. In some cases memory is deliberately selective, as when individuals have some shameful act they are concerned to cover up or a reputation felt necessary to protect.[46] In the case of childhood, events which for the interviewer are relatively unimportant, such as petty theft or a teacher's reprimand, can provide the basis for much verbal manipulation. For the researcher who is consciously participating in the interview process, a perceived necessity for such manipulation can hold important clues to understanding the family and social context in which the individual's childhood was experienced. As Thompson reminds us, "even a lie is a form of communication."[47]

The existence of layers of subjectivity makes it particularly important to assess interviews for internal and external inconsistencies, for it is on their discovery that some of the most useful insights on the experience of childhood within a particular

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45 My next research project based in oral history, presently entitled "Education for Work in a Company Town," will focus in part on the elements in children's upbringing which predisposed them to remain or not remain as adults in the British Columbia coastal community of Powell River. For boys this almost certainly meant following their fathers into the mill, for girls anticipating marriage. The research is funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council, 1989-92.

46 Among other areas of "acute suppression or distoration" are individuals "with a public reputation they still think vital to protect, or hide," and "memories which are felt to be too shameful or embarrasing to be revealed." See Thompson and Burchardt, "Introduction," 16. Some scholars consider that these limitations may be age related: at some critical juncture in the life cycle individuals tend to undertake a "life review," and thereafter bias from repression and distortion diminishes. See, for instance, Peter Coleman, "The Past in the Present -- A Study of Elderly People's Attitudes to Reminiscence," *Oral History Journal* 14 (1986), 50-59.

47 Thompson, *Voices* 145.

context may emerge.[48] My own research interviewing over a hundred men about their experiences in private school suggests that deliberate untruths are very rare but when used possess considerable potential for unravelling the past. Most often, it was the extent of friendships with particular other boys that were magnified or even misrepresented in a concern, clearly still critical a half century later, to convince me -- and thereby the individual himself --that he really did belong. In this case it was my use of a chain of acquaintances to complement my primary reliance on a multi-variable approach that permitted me to recognize what was occurring and thereby to understand the importance of social relationships and how they had been made manifest in material forms, as in the construction of forts to which physical access was carefully limited.[49]

Intervening upward or downward mobility can also affect selectivity of memory. Bertaux-Wiame discovered that migrants to Paris who had achieved upward mobility, became successful, talked to her freely about childhood unhappiness, while those who had not were "very reluctant to recall the miseries of their past." According to Bertaux-Wiame, "for them, to talk about the unhappiness of the past is to talk about the present, too."[50] My own experience was similar. I eventually determined that the small minority of my interviewees who expressed some reticence to talk with me or, in one instance, refused to do so had either by choice or circumstances moved downward in socio-economic status. As one former pupil put it, "You don't want to talk to me: I have not lived up the expectations of the school." In another case, there was no reticence to be interviewed and I only learned inadvertently, through an overheard

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[48] On this point, see Thompson, *Voice*, 239-41.

[49] See Barman, *Growing Up British, passim*.

[50] Bertaux-Wiame, "Life History Approach," 194-95. Also see her response to Louise Tilly in *International Journal of Oral History* 6 (1985), 29-30.

telephone conversation, that the individual was now reduced to delivering mail to make ends meet. Later reviewing our discussion, I realized that the entire interview had been consciously intended to convince me, and probably himself as well, that his status was comparable to that of his socially prominent, wealthy father.

Memory is also selective as a consequence of the passage of time. Each individual's perception of past experience is filtered through a contemporary lens. The French oral historian Daniel Bertaux has made the point in his observation that "stories about the past are told from the present, from a situation which may have changed over the years and defines a new relationship to the past." "Telling a story about the past is a way of expressing indirectly a meaning about the present; in most cases this -- often unconscious -- goal of meaning-construction prevails over the faithful reconstruction of the past."[51] Thus, for example, my interviewees not only were concerned to be perceived as moving upward in socio-economic status but also in general were more willing to expand on close relationships with individuals who subsequently acquired fame rather than with those who remained obscure. As put by a Hungarian oral historian, "everyone builds his or her own theory about the history and course of his or her life by attempting to classify his or her particular successes and fortunes, gifts and choices, favourable and unfavourable elements of his or her fate according to a coherent, explanatory principle."[52]

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51 Daniel Bertaux, "Stories as Clues to Sociological Understanding: the Bakers of Paris," in Thompson with Burchardt, *Our Common History*, 98. Also see Bertaux-Wiame, "Life History Approach," 193. Bertaux also discusses implications for interviewing techniques, suggesting "questioning focussing on *facts* [italics in original]." On oral-history techniques, see Thompson, *Voices*; *Listening to History: The authenticity of oral evidence* (London: Hutchinson, 1987); and Derek Reimer, ed., *Voices: a Guide to Oral History* (Victoria: Provincial Archives of British Columbia, 1984).

52 Maurizio Catani, "Social-Life History as Ritualized Oral Exchange," in *Biography and Society: The Life History Approach in the Social Sciences*, ed. Daniel Bertaux (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1981), 203.

The metaphor of participant observation thus resonates for the oral historian. In a statement which might as easily be attributed to an ethnographer, Thompson reminds us that oral sources "bring unexpected rewards to a historian who is prepared to appreciate the complexity with which reality and myth, 'objective' and 'subjective', are inextricably mixed in all human perception of the world, both individual and collective." As he sums up, "remembering in an interview is a mutual process, which requires understanding on both sides." [53] We must accept the challenge of participation as well as the necessity for observation.

The subjective-objective dialectic inherent in both ethnography and oral history makes the second phase of research, the representation of texts obtained in the field, of critical importance. "Textualization" is defined in ethnography as "the process by which unwritten behavior, beliefs, values, rituals, oral traditions, and so forth, become fixed, atomized, and classified as data of a certain form."[54] This second stage embodies particular complexities, for each participant observer takes from the field not only data but a sense of responsibility as to its best representation or "textualization."[55] The personal obligations to interviewees built up by most oral historians are very similar.[56]

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53 Thompson, *Voice* 135.

54 Van Maanen, *Tales of the Field*, 95, based on P. Ricoeur, "The Model of the Text," *New Literary History* 5 (1973), 91-120.

55 As explained by Van Maanen in *Tales of the Field* (42, fn. 18, and 80 ), in ethnography "the house norm seems to be one in which the fieldworker not only represents, but also takes the side of the studied and thus becomes something of an official voice for their aims, ambitions, and general perspective on the world." While this is most often viewed in history as a temptation to be overcome (although in reality it frequently occurs in subtle forms), in ethnography, "rather than discrediting the ethnography, advocacy often adds to its believability."

56 For instance, the British Columbia oral historian Sara Diamond ("Women," 10) experienced a "very intense rapport" which made it "very uncomfortable" "to ask challenging questions." This same danger is expressed in Janet Finch, "'It's great to have someone to talk to': the ethics and politics of interviewing women," 71-87 in *Social Researching: Politics, Problems, Practice*, ed. Colin Bell and Helen Roberts (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984). Also useful on this point are Daphne Patai, "Ethical problems of Personal Narratives, or, Who Should Eat the Last Piece of Cake?"

Within ethnography the researcher's experiences while in the field are increasingly accepted to be an integral component of the second stage.[57] This is in part due to the growing realization that, to quote from Van Maanen once again, by virtue of being "constructed by talk and action," data acquired via fieldwork are no more than

> interpretations of other interpretations, and are mediated many times over -- by the fieldworker's own standards of relevance for what is of interest; by the historically situated queries put to informants; by the norms current in the fieldworker's professional community for what is proper work; by the self-reflection demanded of both the fieldworker and the informant; by the intentional and unintentional ways a fieldworker or informant is misled; and by the fieldworker's mere presence on the scene as an observer and participant."[58]

End products must acknowledge the role played by the researcher's subjectivities, some ethnographers going so far as to argue that they should be little more than a travel narative or "confessional tale."[59]

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*International Journal of Oral History* 8 (1987), 5-27, which brings together a variety of perspectives on ethical issues; and Susan D. Rose, "Conversations or Conversions: Interviewing American Evangelical Women," *International Journal of Oral History* 8 (1987), 28-40, where the interviewer was repeatedly subject to guidance, counsel and prayer intended to lead to her religious conversion.

57 Early ethnographers were by contrast supremely confident in the "truth" of their descriptions, being for the most part not that concerned with the perspective of members of the culture being observed. For a very brief historical overview, see Adler and Adler, "Past and Future," 7-14, esp. 8, and Van Maanen, *Tales From the Field*, 10, fn. 3, and 14-21.

58 Van Maanen, *Tales of the Field*, 95.

59 Van Maanen's *Tales of the Field* is organized around the various genres currently fashionable in ethnography. The case for a direct line of continuity with the travel account tradition with its interweaving of subjective narrative and objective description is made in Mary Louise Pratt, "Fieldwork in Common Places," 27-50 in Clifford and Marcus, *Writing Culture*

Oral historians have in general not dealt very satisfactorily in their representations of research with its participant observerness.[60] Whereas popular writers have often simply let the interviews speak for themselves with no assessment whatsoever, professional historians have in sharp contrast tended either to minimize the oral contribution or attempt to integrate the information so acquired into an overall "objective" interpretation, in some cases asserting that oral data is only used as "verified" by one-way sources. The contrast is evident in three studies of child immigration from Britain to Canada, all based extensively on interview data describing both the experience itself and child immigrants' adult lives. The two popular writers relied heavily on the oral testimony, in one case becoming de facto the end product, in the other being mined for colourful anecdotes not necessarily representative of any larger whole.[61] In reality, the anecdotes probably misconstrued the larger whole in that they all asserted a marked rise in socio-economic status in adult life.[62] The scholar, on the other hand, was so concerned that "those willing to be interviewed often described themselves as exceptional in the help they received either from Canadian masters and mistresses or from family and friends" that she concluded that her interviews were "not typical child immigrants" but rather "those who felt neither pain nor shame as they looked back and were consequently willing to reminisce with a stranger." So, in the end, while oral data inevitably informed her overall interpretation, she used it directly only as the basis for a single footnote to a statistical

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60 Watson and Watson-Franke, *Interpeting Life Histories*, offers useful guidelines from an ethnographic perspective.

61 Phyllis Harrison, ed., *The Home Children: Their personal stories* (Winnipeg: Watson & Dwyer, 1979); and Kenneth Bagnall, *The Little Immigrants: The Orphans Who Came to Canada* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1980). Although asserting that he "corresponded with and met several hundred: child immigrants "who quite willingly discussed their experiences," Bagnall included the names of only 40 in his bibliography and their are no footnotes.

62 Bagnell, *Little Immigrants*, 9 and 264-65. For the individual vignettes, see pp. 185-99, 207-13, 216-17, 219-22, 233-37 and 241-52.

comment in what was overall an abstract, impersonal and even dehumanized analysis.[63] A practical consequence in this case was to make the better of the two popular interpretations a national best seller, whereas the scholarly volume has been read only by the diligent.

Again it is European oral historians who have best recognized the potential in verbal evidence. As well as having a tremendous role to play in peopling the past, so to speak, we must search out, to quote Passarini, "the more subtle meanings to be derived from experiential evidence."[64] What has been obtained through research are in essence "people's *interpretations* of their lived experience."[65] While not ignoring the factual information garnered, attention must be given, according to Bertaux-Wiame, to "the form of its telling," which "reveal the shape of the mind," the cultural and ideological structures."[66] In the words of an Italian scholar, Alessandro Portelli, oral history "tells us less about events as such than about their meaning." "The unique and precious element which oral sources force upon the "historian and which no other sources possess in equal measure (unless it be literary ones) is the speaker's subjectivity; and therefore, if the research is broad and articulated enough, a cross-section of the subjectivity of a social group or class."[67] Used sensitively, the end result might assist, according to a Polish oral historian, in "marking the orientation points

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63 Joy Parr, *Labouring Children: British Immigrant Apprentices to Canada, 1869-1924* (London and Montreal: Croom Helm and McGill-Queen's University Press, 1980), 124, 125, Table 7.1 on 126, 133 and 140, fn21.

64 "Report on Fourth International Oral History Conference," 19.

65 Italics in original. Review by Rina Benmayor of Thompson with Burchardt, *Our Common History*, in *International Journal of Oral History* 4 (1983), 194.

66 Bertaux-Wiame, "Life History Approach," 192 and 195.

67 Portelli, "Peculiarities," 99-100.

[used] by various people in different categories," including "the position of various classes within the social distribution of work."[68]

Very importantly, the oral historian must also engage in an ongoing dialectic between past and present. Once recollections are interpreted as to what they have to tell us about the present, we must move on to interpretation of the past so far as possible in its own terms. It is here, at this point, that the insights derived from the concept of participant observation must be broadened if we are to construct the historical ethnography of childhood. Certainly, for the ethnographer as for the oral historian, the result of either the first or second stage of research can never be complete for, to quote Clifford once again,

> Cultures are not scientific "objects" (assuming such things exist, even in the natural sciences). Culture, and our views of "it," are produced historically, and are actively contested. There is no whole picture that can be filled in," since the perception and filling of a gap lead to the awareness of other gaps.[69]

Some ethnographers have consequently urged that end products not be "framed" or "closed" by virtue of having some overall structure, for so to do assumes a level of objectivity in actuality never obtainable. As Van Maanen puts it, "closure is itself an argument for certain knowledge."[70] For the oral historian such a position is inherently unsatsifactory and underlines ethnography's essentially cross-sectional orientation, resulting in what one historian has described as "a kind of systematic and static description that is fundamentally ahistorical." As was my recent experience, so

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68 Bronislaw Misztal, "Autobiographies, Diaries, Life Histories, and Oral Histories of Workers as a Source of Socio-Historical Knowledge," *International Journal of Oral History* 2 (1981), 186 and 190.

69 Clifford, "Introduction," 18.

70 Van Maanen, *Tales of the Field*, 64.

he also has had ethnographers "confess that their discipline has not dealt very satisfactorily with problems of cultural change."[71]

In sharp contrast, almost without exception, historians "frame" analyses, in some cases around a particular problem, cycle of events, set of parameters but most often around a period of time. The impression left is not necessarily that what is presented is "certain knowledge" but rather a "best" interpretation based on the evidence. Structurally, the problem posed in the introduction of a piece of writing is resolved or "closed" by the conclusion. Indeed, without closure there can be no historical writing, for inherent within the discipline of history is the assumption that from within the data order emerges. As summed up in a widely used text on historical method, "the most important principle that the novice student of history must learn is that the business of a historian is to make judgments and to establish causal relationships between facts: he must place them in some significant pattern and order and not simply be a reporter."[72] The most-often used means of closure -- chronology -- is generally perceived as possessing a certain objectivity existing out and beyond the particular researcher.[73] Even social historians focussing on the collective behaviour

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71 William J. Bouwsma, "From History of Ideas to History of Meaning," *Journal of Interdisicplinary History* 12 (981), 289. See also Clifford, "Introduction," 12. Even ethnographers focussing on past periods of time, as indeed some do, are reticent to consider chronology as an important variable. See, for instance, Celia Haig-Brown, *Resistance and Renewal: Surviving the Indian Residential School* (Vancouver: Tillicum, 1988). Although based in part on participant observation, it derives primarily from interviews with 13 students attending the school between 1907 and 1967, a time period of fundamental change in Indian educational policy. Yet the body of the book rarely differentiates interviewees' separate experiences by time.

72 In italics in original. Norman E. Cantor and Richard I. Schneider, *How to Study History* (Arlington Heights: Harlan Davidson, 1967), 19.

73 This is not to say that the concept of time has not come under challenge from historians, as in Donald J. Wilcox, *The Measure of Times Past: Pre-Newtonian Chronologies and the Rhetoric of Relative Time* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

of individuals, on "culture" if you will, frame their analyses in "time slices," be they of long or short duration.[74]

Chronology can, of course, only be incorporated into end products if it is also part of the first stage, that is, of research in the field. For the oral historian the concept of time must remain an integral component of every interview.[75] Particularly when retrieving the experience of childhood, actual dates may be largely irrelevant. Creative approaches to the concept of time include sensitivity to how recalled occurrences are related to each other by "before" and "after" or by their relationship to larger, datable events such as holidays, family or community activities or even worldwide news occurrences. It is, of course, not so much the precise relationship to historical chronology that is the goal as it is the effect of an individual's age and the passage of time on the experience of childhood.

The intersection of participant observation and chronology provides then, I want to suggest, a potentially useful approach for constructing what I have termed the historical ethnography of childhood through oral history. Rather than attempting to remould the potential in oral history to fit traditional historical assumptions derived from one-way materials, we should build upon the methodology's unique strengths. The example of women's experience yet again makes the point. By being participant observers, by entering into the experience of childhood as it was lived, or more accurately perceived to have been lived, we acquire new insights into the larger context in which the living occurred. As Bertaux-Wiame explains:

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74 The phrase comes from Christopher Lloyd, *Explanation in Social History* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 20.

75 The importance of sensitivity to the concept of time is underlined in a recent study of the early intellectual development of poor children based on regular videotaping over the first six years of life which concluded that their lack of early development of the meaning of time accounted in part for poor school performance. Study undertaken by Dolores Norton of the School of Social Service Administration, University of Chicago, reported in "Time Is Not on Their Side," *Time* 27 February 1989, 56.

> Women do not intentionally choose to tell their lives in terms of personal relationships rather than as accounts of what they have themselves done; the form of their story only reflects the form of their real life .... And if many individual men really believe they have been the subject of their life course -- which is highly doubtful -- it is simply because this is the way men are supposed to live their lives. When people tell their life stories, culture speaks through their mouths.[76]

This may well mean, for example, that for women the experience of childhood, most often lived within the larger context of family and the school, was both more satisfying in actuality and also so appears in retrospect than for men.

Yet childhood experiences have often been viewed by historians of childhood as essentially gender-neutral, as in the case of two very different publications of the early 1980s based on written recollections.[77] The first, which analyzed autobiographies written in English for "information about the psychological consequences of the exposure of Indians to Western education," refers throughout the text to "children" and to "childhood" even though all but four or five of the hundred autobiographies on which the analysis is based were written by males. Not even in her discussion of the limitations in sources did the author, Judith Walsh, indicate any

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[76] Bertaux-Wiame, "Life History Approach," 195. Anna Bravo has made this same point more specifically in "Solidarity and Loneliness: Piedmontese Peasant Women at the Turn of the Century," *International Journal of Oral History* 3 (1982), 77-78. For a perceptive account based on written sources within a specific historical context, see Laura S. Strumingher, *What Were Little Girls and Boys Made Of? Primary Education in Rural France, 1830-1880* (Albany: State University of New York, 1983).

[77] Judith Walsh, *Growing Up in British India: Indian Autobiographies of Childhood and Education under the Raj* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1983), and John Burnett, *Destiny Obscure: Autobiographies of childhood, education and family from the 1820s to the 1920s* (London: Allen Lane, 1982).

awareness of possible gender bias.[78] While the introduction to the second volume, focussing on British childhood in the nineteenth century, does assess the effect of class and gender on the actual experience of childhood, the lessons to be learned from two-way sources might have markedly altered John Burnett's *Destiny Obscure*. Of the 25 autobiographies selected to depict working-class childhoods, all but one or two emphasize subsequent rise in social-economic status, which may well expalin why they were written in the first place. Moreover, of the 14 male success stories, 11 depict themselves as rising primarily through their own efforts, just three through the efforts of an external agency such as the school. Conversely, of the nine females who triumphed, three attributed rise to their own efforts, six to the school.

The extent to which a different interpretation would have resulted had greater sensitivity existed on the part of these two authors to the possible effects of gender and class must, however, remain somewhat speculative, in part because the experience of childhood has received so little attention even from scholars utilizing the oral-history methodology. Indeed, the insights used in this paper have perforce come more from research focussing on adulthood that on childhood. On the other hand, the example of these two monographs centring on the experience of childhood suggest that the advantages of an historical ethnographic approach extends beyond oral history as a methodology.

Adoption of an historical ethnographic approach in no way diminishes our responsibility to search out broader contexts in which to place the texts that emerge out of our research. The retrieval and representation of individual experiences of childhood cannot be allowed to remain an end in itself, but must rather become the means toward better general explanation than would otherwise be the case. Sensitivity

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[78] Walsh, ix-x, 135-39 and 164-68. For examples of "children" and "boys" being used interchangably, see 15-16, 29, 49, 52 and 132.

to variations in experiences allows us to go beyond the individuals themselves, each of whom has per force a single window on the past. Thompson explains,

> It is only by tracing individual life stories that connections can be documented between the general system of economic, class, sex and age structure at one end, and the development of personal character at the other, through the mediating influences of parents, brothers and sisters, and the wider family, of peer groups and neighbours, school and religion, newspapers and the media, art and culture. Only when the precise role of these intermediary institutions in, for example, socialization into sex and class roles, has been established, will a theoretical integration become a possibility.

In his view, this represents "for the future probably the greatest challenge and contribution which oral evidence may offer to the making of history."[79] The experience of childhood is clearly central to such an agenda.

Other scholars have underlined the necessity to place individual experience within such a larger theoretical framework. The American social historian Louise Tilly has recently observed that the history worth doing "preserves individual variability while identifying dominant social patterns."[80] Bertaux-Wiame goes further by suggesting a possible means of linkage in her observation that "it is by finding recurrent patterns throughout a series of life trajectories that we infer the existence of socio structural processes." Oral recollections make clear the ways in which "large societal structures become tangible constraints for individuals and

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79 Thompson, *Voices* 261and 262.

80 Louise Tilly, "People's History and Social Science History," *Social Science History* 7 (1983), 457-74, reprinted in *International Journal of Oral History* 6 (1985), 17.

families," and, "conversely, [how] the aggregated practices of isolated actors may eventually influence macrosocial processes."[81] In the words of a leading American oral historian, "how people see the world is as important in understanding how they act as the act itself." "People are actors in history, and in many cases they tell us about their world with a precision and insight that we, as outsiders, lack."[82]

Paul Thompson usefully sums up for us in his observation that "every historical source derived from human perception is subjective, but only the oral source allows us to challenge that subjectivity: to unpack the layers of memory, dig back into its darkness, hoping to reach the hidden truth."[83] In accepting the challenge to construct the historical ethnography of childhood, we are not excluding objectivity, either as traditionally perceived or as underlies the concept of chronology. Rather, by beocming participant observers, we add new dimensions to our research.

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81 Bertaux-Wiame, response, 28.

82 Ronald J. Grele, concluding comment in Tilly debate, *International Journal of Oral History* 6 (1985), 44-45. Application of oral history techniques to the history of childhood may be growing, as indicated by, for instance, a special "Childhood" issue of *Oral History* (15, 2 [1987]) and the creation of an oral history project on child life by the Please Touch Museum for Children in Philadelphia (Oral History Association, *Newsletter* 20,3 [1986], 2).

83 Thompson, *Voice* 150.